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Motivating Seniors in Civic Engagement

By

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Thank you Dr. Aparicio, Dr. Arredondo, Respected Colleagues. This is the year of “Aging Texas Well”, “Aging Well In America”, the decade of the White House Conference on Aging and we are entering countdown for “The Boomer Explosion”! So much emphasis on aging tells us that we might have some problems. It seems everyone knows about those problems and now we are charged with the responsibility of finding some solutions. The key word is Policy. We are privileged to have a prestigious group of Americans charged with the responsibility of listening to our solutions, appointing us as resources and guiding our legislators in policy development. Our gratitude is extended to our President and the Policy Committee.

We’ve heard the numbers, plans and attitudes of the 78 million retirees who will be joining us in the next 5 years. Plans to harness their energy are still in formation. Unfortunately all the Boomers are not going to be healthy, wealthy seniors, willing or even able to lend a helping hand, many are going to need help themselves. This group is known to, “play hard, expect instant reward and easy livin’”, however they are also creative, energetic and fitness centered. They need to be proactively engaged. We have to generate public awareness and interest and we must begin now to create a visible, orderly, and rewarding environment. We have no choice, because long before the next White House Conference on Aging we will multiply in such numbers that the identification and implementation of Solutions must begin at once.

A group from Washington University's Center for Social Development brilliantly identified five components for leveraging the interests, abilities and capacities of older adults; as **Expectations, Information, Incentives, Access and Facilitation.**¹

I want to focus on four components of that presentation that I'll refer to as **Marketing...Accessibility...Diversity....and Appreciation.** I'm a Registered Nurse, retired from the Health Care Industry and I understand these issues because they so aptly apply to the way we have attracted professionals into the health care market for many years. It is also probable that any social, civic or business organization can equally apply those same four points to their own endeavors.

Marketing is simply employment of clever ways to grab people's attention. To increase interest in voluntarism we must be creative, unique and very visible. We want people to stop and listen to our message. **We need a national campaign to inform the public of the many volunteer projects where help is needed. Would be, volunteers, but also those in need of help, must hear more about the services available. We need a spokesperson to give that message.** We need a "Champion", a "Shining Knight" a "Voice". Someone of honor, easily recognized, respected and worthy of our banner, someone with a media base who will also champion our cause.... we need someone like Oprah Winfrey. In fact, we need Oprah!

Certainly there is an abundance of diverse opportunities to be found on the internet but to expect new retirees to surf the internet and "finger walk" through the maze of opportunities is not effective enough. In fact many retirees do not have computer ability or access. More substantial information related to civic programs could proclaim voluntarism as a serious

¹ Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, 2001; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, Tang, Thirupathy & Nagchoudhuri, 2003; McBride, Sherraden, Benitez and Johnson, 2004.

subject. It is very difficult to gain attention for even severe senior problems and getting publicity for volunteer efforts is next to impossible.

Accessibility to Civic Engagement is as important as marketing the programs. Many companies allow paid time off for employees who participate in community projects. **Recognition of such companies by our federal government in tax breaks or other benefits could encourage many more participants in such projects.** When employees are engaged before retirement the chances are much greater that they will remain, “civically engaged”, after retirement. Research has also shown that early introduction of young people to community service is likely to create lifetime commitments.² **But what of the many hours young people give? Where are those hours and tasks filed? A pipeline between organizations where volunteer services are employed, into a data base where records are maintained could allow continuous tracking of accumulated contributions of time and energy across the lifespan.** Participation in civic service plays a major role in gaining college admission but there are some participants who aren’t planning to pursue higher education. Where are their contributed hours banked for later use? I envision a banking process of social and civic capital to be used later in life for those who participate and contribute regularly in Civic Engagement.

Volunteer Fairs held by organizations and corporations as a means of attracting helpers, then facilitating their entrance into Civic Engagement, have proven successful in some states.³ Welcome packets, prizes, meal tickets, transportation vouchers to destinations and other incentives donated by various Civic Organizations would further increase interest. Partnering Programs can be developed to team paid staff with potential volunteers. Partnering

² [Elich, T., Senior Scholar, Carnegie Foundation, “Measuring Up 2000: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education.](#)

³ [University of Montana, Missoula, Office of Civic Engineering \(Davidson Honors College\)](#)

is a means of transcending old barriers such as staff resistance to change, threatened job security and reluctance to take time away from regular tasks to teach volunteers. Creation of an orientation process to be conducted between partners creates bonds and job pride. Offering paid staff time off with pay equal to hours spent orienting volunteers, introduces job pride, a welcoming atmosphere and often creates lasting bonds of friendship.

Diversifying volunteer efforts for best use of talent, falls far short of community needs. There is a certain preconceived idea that when a person retires they lose all credibility, ability and value. Retirees are often so eager and willing to “pay back” to society for their own good fortune they enter Civic Engagement in unskilled, even unappreciated positions. It is important to capture the interest of possible volunteers early after retirement in any manner possible in order to hold their interest. Their own good health and vitality is also at risk when they delay entrance into post-retirement activities. Community educational programs should be offered for Senior volunteers who choose to pursue a second career, allowing them to “pay back” or “forward” in volunteer hours. Assistance is needed in developing more diverse volunteer programs. An example of educating to fill the gaps is the Ombudsman Program introduced in 1978. Without creative people seeing the need for intervention in cases of senior neglect, the program would not exist today. We need similar efforts dedicated to expansion of Civic Engagement opportunities such as trained volunteer staff in “Call Centers” of our local and state agencies. Service response could be dramatically accelerated.

Trained and experienced medical retirees are perfect recruits for Homeland Security endeavors. Such retirees are in contact with many other similarly experience seniors willing to develop an emergency staff pool. They are more aware of facilities in their neighborhoods

where shelters could be located and are available to assist in building emergency inventory, cataloging and managing deployment if emergency occurs. Far too many highly skilled, specialty focused seniors, many with previously attained high security clearance, are under used. **Again the importance of a strong database becomes apparent.**

We must change the image that only the privileged have free time to donate in helping others. **This is a negative approach to attracting volunteers from all areas of the community. There are many, many, caregivers who, themselves live on the edge of poverty, but like a watch with a good battery, “keep on tickin’ “. They must be given cause to feel equally valuable.** These volunteers need assistance even as they give. Transportation and meal vouchers, free clinic and pharmaceuticals would be appropriate assistance to those who are offering assistance to others.

It is likewise, deplorable to continue fostering the idea that physical fitness is a prerequisite to Civic Engagement. Volunteer programs which make adjustments for volunteers with diminishing physical capacity and extend beyond social, economic and ethnic constraints, are noticeably missing. Reward programs should deal with ways of sheltering and nurturing those who have given when they are no longer physically strong. Access to physical therapy or medical equipment to assist them with disabilities in order to employ their talents in volunteer roles is worth the effort to keep them engaged. Seniors who remain active in service roles are known to remain healthier and live longer. Every senior remaining active and healthy is one less senior using health care dollars. When they too need assistance their record must show the “pay back” they have earned.

Recognition and Reward for volunteers is, of course small, in monetary terms. The financial capital should be, and is, used for needy seniors, not for extravagant reward to

volunteers. But, total absence of Appreciation or Recognition is unacceptable. Consider the retiree who would like to learn a new skill or expand their education but have too little income to allow themselves that luxury. Individuals who have attended seminars and workshops in order to stay on the leading edge of their profession should remain able to do so through corporate or civic donations or government grants accumulated for that specific purpose. With a bit of incentive, community leaders and seminar sponsors could provide admission to educational events for seniors who are civically engaged. The updated training and knowledge they receive is returned ten-fold in; renewal of commitment and energy, new skills and attitudes passed on to co-workers and the seniors they serve.

Rewards should also be fun and they should come while volunteers can still enjoy regular evenings out. Retirees who thoughtfully apply their talents to Civic Engagement activities day after day, would appreciate receiving recognition from sponsors of civic events such as symphony, ballet, sports events and other social occasions. Attend a fine arts event, or a sports event and count the empty seats.....uncountable? Imagine those seats filled with volunteers...a gift to the givers and a treat to the performers playing to a full house. Why should anyone donating time and energy over a life time, have to wait until they are too feeble to enjoy an outing, before they are acknowledged. An appreciation dinner after 25 years of service is thin soup to offer people who have given hours and years of service, especially when most of us will be on a restrictive diet by then anyway.

This is the very most appropriate year to initiate federal policy enhancing, assisting and rewarding Civic Engagement. We have been offered the platform of a highly focused Policy Panel. They are listening to our many messages, taking note of our requests and selecting

representatives from the White House Conference delegates to assist in creation of Senior Policies. They will take our messages to the legislature and our President.

Those thousand points of light recognized by our first President Bush have grown, but they must keep on growing in number and brilliance to reach the far corners of some very dim and needy places. To keep the lights on we have to start paying some electric bills or in the words of Mother Teresa, “You must add oil to keep lamps burning”. Sound threatening? You bet...but millions of needy seniors are hearing more threatening messages this very moment. We, the Seniors of this nation, are service driven...we serve our community, other seniors, our families and now, we extend our hands to the members of the Policy Committee to help in anyway we can.

I thank you for the compliment of your attention and this opportunity to comment to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

Resources

Administration on Aging, "Senior Corp"
www.Administration on Aging seniorcorp.org/howtoserve.html

Erlich, T., Senior Scholar, Carnegie Foundation, Measuring Up 2000: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education
<http://measuringup.highereducation.org/2000/articles/Thomas Ehrlich.cfm>

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ammcbride@gwbmail.wsustl.edu

Susan Stroud, Executive Director, Innovations in Civic Participation, October 27, 2004
stroud@icicp.org

Wuthnow, R. (1991). Acts of Compassion: “Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves”, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

University of Montana, Missoula, Office for Civic Engineering (Davidson Honors College)
www2.utmt.edu/dhc/occe/online_listings_volunteer_fair